Adam Smith's contribution to secularisation

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This article examined several crucial themes in Adam Smith's philosophy with the purpose of highlighting and assessing his contribution to the secularisation of Western society. The article, written from the perspective of reformational philosophy, begins with a brief biography and sketch of Adam Smith's influence on modern society, followed by a summary of Ponti Venter's view on Smith. This sets the scene for a discussion of Adam Smith's project, his method of tackling it, and his views on systems, philosophy of history and the concept of philosophy.

Adam Smith se bydrae tot sekularisering. Hierdie artikel het verskeie beslissende temas in Adam Smith se filosofie ondersoek met die doel om sy bydrae tot die sekularisering van die Westerse samelewing uit te lig en te assesseer. Die artikel, wat vanuit die perspektief van die Reformatoriese filosofie geskryf is, begin met 'n kort biografie en skets van Adam Smith se invloed op die moderne samelewing, gevolg deur 'n opsomming van Ponti Venter se siening van Smith. Dit skep die toneel vir 'n bespreking van Adam Smith se projek, sy metode, asook sy siening oor sisteme, die filosofie van geskiedenis en die konsep van filosofie.

Introduction

Ponti Venter, to whom this article is dedicated, has studied intensely the philosophies of the Enlightenment period. In his view, the recent world cannot be understood without acknowledging the influence of the Enlightenment. His analyses of Smith's philosophy emphasise his mechanistic world picture as well as the tensions between nature and culture and the individual and society during the Enlightenment period.

As there is no intrinsic reflection in Smith on divine law or divinely given norms to which the creation is subject, he has contributed to the secularisation of Western culture since the 18th century, especially through his influence on the development of liberal political economy.

Some recent studies on Smith's methodology and history of philosophy point in the direction of Smith's philosophic conception as akin to ennoetism (in-the-mind-ism), a type identified in D.H.Th. Vollenhoven's system of the history of philosophy. This type is shared by a number of Enlightenment thinkers, who, like Smith, were influenced by Isaac Newton (1642–1724), who was also an ennoetist. It involves a contemplating, thinking spirit and a psychosomatic reality that moves by itself, mechanically, and which is, therefore, conducive to laissez-faire economics.

This concept has made it possible for Smith to be a technicistic philosopher, in the sense that new technologies propel by themselves the accumulation of capital and the division of labour. Hans Sachsse's definition of technicism as a belief that all of life's problems may be solved by a scientific-technical transformation of the world (Sachsse 1978:180) is applicable to Adam Smith, who called it progress or improvement. Technicism has become a major road to a materialistic secularised society.

The article is written from the perspective of reformational philosophy and begins with a brief biography and sketch of Adam Smith's influence on modern society, followed by a summary of Ponti Venter's view on him. This sets the scene for a discussion of Adam Smith's project, his method of tackling it, and his views on systems, the philosophy of history and the concept of philosophy.

Brief biography

Adam Smith was born in 1723 and studied moral philosophy in Glasgow under Hutcheson, after which he went to Oxford University. From 1748 to 1751 he lectured on 'rhetoric and belles

lettres' in Edinburgh. In 1751 he was elected Chair of Logic at the University of Glasgow, but was translated in 1752 to the Chair of Moral Philosophy. A large part of his lectures on moral philosophy were published in 1759 as 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments'. He resigned from this professorship in 1763. In 1764 he visited France, with the son of the Duke of Buccleuch, where he met the leading French philosophers and economists. After his return to the United Kingdom in 1766 he completed 'An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations', which was first published in 1776. He prepared not only four subsequent editions, but also five new editions of 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments'. In 1778 he became Commissioner of Customs in Scotland. He moved in the circles of prominent merchants, politicians and academics. He died in 1790. In 1795 a set of papers were published posthumously under the title 'Essays on Philosophical Subjects' covering topics such as histories of astronomy, ancient physics and ancient logics and metaphysics, the external senses, the imitative arts and the affinity between music, dancing and poetry.

Adam Smith's influence

Robert Heilbroner (1955) outlined how revolutionary the general operation of markets governed by the 'price mechanism' was at the time when Smith's 'The Wealth of Nations' was published. Previously, traditional and/or authoritarian rulers were instrumental in providing people with their daily sustenance. The introduction of an 'economy' as a set of markets, in which people and firms are only motivated by their self-interest, was a great novelty. 'Land, labour and capital as foundations of the economic system or as impersonal, de-humanised economic entities were modern inventions, as modern as the calculus' (Heilbroner 1955:20, author's own translation). Expounding Smith's system Heilbroner emphasises the power of the division of labour which, together with the price mechanism, would propel an accumulation of capital as a means of growing material welfare.

Similarly, Karl Polanyi (1983) referred to the great transformation that took place in Western societies during the 19th century, as the economy became dominated by markets. Previously, land, labour and money (capital) were not part of a self-regulating system of markets and prices. In his view there has rarely been a statement that anticipated the future so much as Adam Smith's dictum that the division of labour depends on the human propensity to barter, truck and exchange one thing for another (Polanyi *ibid*:71, 72).

Influential thinkers of the 20th century, such as F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, Walter Lippman and many other contributors to neo-liberalism – a system of thought that views the whole of society, ideally, as a set of markets, free from Government intervention and with individuals striving to maximise their self-interest – have echoed Adam Smith's views on the power of the price mechanism. Invariably, they emphasise, like Smith, the inefficiencies of the state and the productiveness of the private sector.

Current economic theory of firms, consumers, welfare, international trade, capital, and growth shows how equilibrium (balance) is achieved through 'the price mechanism' by individuals and business firms maximising their utility and profits. Behavioural economics (rational choice theory) extends this thinking to just about everything under the sun.

Although self-interest and its maximisation had already become part of the Western discourse before Adam Smith (Laval 2007), his popularity has reinforced and spread its influence. Kouwenhoven (1965:42) notes that for Smith's contemporaries the 'The Wealth of Nations' rated as second only to the Bible. Since, as Laval (2007) points out, self-interest has become 'a pure and simple substitute for the Christian religion' (p. 18), Adam Smith has made a major contribution to secularisation, understood as the de-christianising of Western culture.

Ponti Venter's assessment of Adam Smith's philosophy

Similar to Laval, Ponti Venter sees the Enlightenment as a new view of life which eliminated the last remnants of Christian doctrine from the synthesis of Christian and Classical ideas of the Middle Ages (Venter 1992:321). Indeed, he understands our modern Western society as one that is directed by 'the Divinity of Material Welfare' (Venter 2002:289).

Venter's assessment is that, as an Enlightenment thinker, Adam Smith believed that social progress would be brought about through economic growth, provided people are free, and not hindered by Government, to promote their self-interest by saving and working hard under the critical eye of the impartial spectator (an ideal human being led by reason). Self-interest is consistent with competition between individuals and would enable society to advance towards progress (dialectic between individual and society). Smith follows Hobbes and Rousseau's contractual view of society, albeit economistically interpreted (man is by nature a hawker). By separating God's final causality (the teleology of nature) from human efficient causality Smith could develop theories of morality and economics in a mechanistic way, despite his acceptance of a cosmic harmony à la Leibniz. Smith was led to this mechanistic approach through his interest in Isaac Newton.

Thus, competition is necessary to prevent the machine of society from stagnating. At the same time one can find in Smith a longing for a simple life in unspoilt nature, with a preference for farming, indicating a dialectic between origin and progress or between nature and culture (Venter 1992:324–330).

Recent studies by Biziou (2003), Marouby (2004), Buchan (2006), Phillipson (2011) and an earlier one by Van Leeuwen (1984), not only confirm Venter's analysis, but also extend it.

Smith's project

Phillipson (2011) describes Smith's project as nothing less than:

> to develop a genuine Science of Man based upon the observation of human nature and human history and which would explain the principles of government and legislation that ought to be followed by enlightened rulers who wanted to extend the liberty and happiness of their subjects and the wealth and power of their dominions. (p. 2)

Smith tackled much of this project in his lectures on moral philosophy, which were divided into four areas, namely:

1. Natural theology (proofs of the being and attributes of God and the principles upon which religion is founded).
2. Natural ethics (the basis of 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments' [1759]).
3. Morality as codified into justice to trace according to Buchan (2006:42): the gradual progress of jurisprudence, both public and private, from the rudest to the most refined ages, and to point out the effects of those arts which contribute to subsistence, and the accumulation of property, in producing correspondent improvements or alterations in law and government.
4. The political institutions relating to commerce, finance, and the ecclesiastical and military establishments.

The last two formed the basis of 'The Wealth of Nations' (1776). Student notes on the lectures of part 3 have been published as 'Lectures on Jurisprudence' (Smith 1766). Student notes on the course given in Edinburgh on Rhetoric and Belles letters in 1748–1751, including an essay on the origin and significance of language, have also become available.

The lectures on jurisprudence include much of the material of Smith (1776), meaning that his views on political economy should be seen as part and parcel of his moral philosophy.

Van Leeuwen (1984:33, 34) puts the four-part curriculum in the context of Thomas of Aquinas's distinction between the '*philosophicae disciplinae*' [study of philosophy], which were guided by natural reason, and the '*sacra doctrina*' [sacred doctrine], which were part of supra-natural theology and guided by the light of Revelation. Natural theology resorted under the '*philosophicae disciplinae*' [philosophical discipline]. Despite not publishing on natural theology Smith would have lectured on proofs of God's existence and a moral world government. As a deist, he believed that the existence of God and a moral system of world government are universal truths which are acknowledged by human reason. This elimination of Revelation and a reduction of all theology to rational insight have become 'an essential aspect of the total secularisation process', meaning that 'the natural has assumed the fundamental position of Revelation' (Van Leeuwen 1984:35).

The wide scope of Smith's project and publications suggests, according to Biziou (2003), that he aimed at becoming a 'Newton of the human world as a whole' (pp. 103–104). As Newton had managed to unify the theory of astronomy on the basis of the principle of gravity, so Smith sought to show the basic principles that unify the human spheres of ethics, jurisprudence, political economy and others. Not surprisingly, Smith was unable to finish this grand project. Many parts he had drafted were burnt at his request, with the exception of the essays on philosophical subjects. Of these, the history of astronomy holds pride of place, as its methodological introduction provides clues to his general approach.

Smith's method

Smith's method consisted of a Newtonian analysis involving 'certain principles known or proved in the beginning, from whence we account for the several Phenomena, connecting all together by the same Chain', so that people would get a map of the world of experience (Phillipson 2011:100).

Smith (1795) focuses in particular upon three psychological sentiments, namely:

> wonder, surprise, and admiration, are words which, though often confounded, denote, in our language, sentiments that are indeed allied, but that are in some respects different also, and distinct from one another. What is new and singular, excites that sentiment which, in strict propriety, is called Wonder; what is unexpected, Surprise; and what is great or beautiful, Admiration. (p. 33)

According to Smith (1795:50) humankind would have been baffled in its early stages by strange phenomena, such as an eclipse of the sun. They alleviated their concerns by fantasising that Jupiter's invisible hand was the cause, maybe because he was displeased with them. Hence, cults were designed to keep the deities happy. This age of superstition was superseded when sufficient spare subsistence allowed some people time for science (Smith *ibid*).

Systematic reflection, which involves the imagination, now had to find another way of alleviating the sentiment of wonder when it was disturbed by intervals or gaps in the normal orderly chain of events. Rather than imagining that gods are the cause of phenomena, philosophers looked for machines that calm the imagination and dispense with the need of finding final causes. They are blind mechanisms which obey general laws. According to Smith (1795) we may also think of systems, instead of machines, because:

> systems in many respects resemble machines. A machine is a little system, created to perform, as well as to connect together, in reality, those different movements and effects which the artist has occasion for. A system is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed. (p. 66)

The imagination needs analogies to perceive the systems that make sense of phenomena, by using something familiar from another field. As Smith (1795) puts it:

> In the same manner also, others have written parallels of painting and poetry, of poetry and music, of music and architecture, of beauty and virtue, of all the fine arts; systems which have universally owed their origin to the elucubrations[1] of those who were acquainted with the one art, but ignorant of the other;

1.The original has 'lucubrations'.

> who therefore explained to themselves the phaenomena, in that which was strange to them, by those in that which was familiar; and with whom, upon that account, the analogy, which in other writers gives occasion to a few ingenious similitudes, became the great hinge upon which every thing turned. (p. 47)

As the imagination confronts phenomena and seeks to connect them, it needs bridges or analogies between what is already known and that which is still unknown. In this way it seeks to make the universe coherent in a system of thought. Systems, in their perfection, are aesthetically pleasing and, therefore, excite the sentiment of admiration (Smith 1795:46).

Smith believes that something is only understood properly if it meets three criteria, namely:

- familiarity (1795:46, 47)
- completeness (1795:50)
- simplicity (1795:66).

Applying these criteria to Newton's system, Smith (1795) notes that 'gravity is most familiar to us' and that Newton's principles 'connect together most perfectly all the phaenomena of the Heavens' (completeness). Simplicity is entailed by the 'universality of gravity, and that it decreases as the squares of the distance increase, and all the appearances ... necessarily follow' (pp. 104–105). The simplicity and perfection of Newton's system is aesthetically pleasing. Biziou (2003) notes: 'it expresses a fundamental requirement of the spirit in its attempt to understand the universe' (p. 86).

Science is not so much about gathering data but rather about connecting them by means of principles. Systems should provide coherence to a field of study. They are always open to revision when the sentiments of surprise and wonder are excited again by new discoveries or facts. Such revisions should restore coherence.

Once a field of study has been satisfactorily systematised, another field may call for attention. Thus, the study of astronomy was followed by that of ancient physics, which included fossils, minerals, plants, and animals (Smith 1795:106).

In terms of what he saw as his own task, namely systematising human society, Smith specified neither his grand comprehensive system of all the disciplines nor the unique principle that would tie them all together. In Biziou's view, however, he used the principle of analogy as a key, because it lies behind the concepts of sympathy (moral sentiments), exchange (economics), and imitation (aesthetics) (Biziou 2003:107, footnote 2).

Self-regulating systems

When a system is overcomplete, it lacks simplicity and familiarity, necessitating a revision. When it satisfies the requirement of simplicity, it may not be able to account for all of the phenomena. Hence, the three requirements tend to keep each other in balance. A good system is self-regulating. Smith's works on moral sentiments and political economy had self-regulating systems at their core.

The system of moral sentiments

In the theory of moral sentiments 'sympathy denotes our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever' (Smith 1759:10). Sympathy helps us to see ourselves in the imagination as others see us. It works like a mirror. Since sympathy with others might be excessive, so that it impairs our effectiveness, it is regulated by an impartial spectator, who is a potential, ideal and, therefore abstract rational human (Smith 1759:83ff). This rational human moderates the intensity of our passions and sentiments to a level that makes it possible to live in society. The medial degree of virtue (convenance) should allow society to function well. By deviating from the middle road problems arise. Should, for instance, people pursue the interests of others by completely disregarding their own, society would become dysfunctional. Similarly, if they wanted vengeance at all costs or were exclusively bent on satisfying their own interests, society would break down. Nonetheless, crimes should be punished, lest society falls apart. Put positively, justice is called for as a basis for economic exchange. A moral society should be fair because all people are equal. Smith (1795) stated if somebody:

> in the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments, … should jostle, or throw down any (of his competitors), the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play, which they cannot admit of. This man is to them, in every respect, as good as they are. (p. 83)

The rational moderator of sympathy built into each person is, therefore, essential to maintain society (Biziou 2003:130–131).

The system of exchange

Smith's system of political economy takes its starting point in 'a certain propensity in human nature … to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another' (Smith 1776:22). It is this propensity which gives rise to the division of labour and its advantages.

Smith bases his anthropology, along with Turgot and Rousseau, on a four-stage history (Marouby 2004:25) based upon mode of subsistence, namely:

- hunting and fishing
- shepherding
- agriculture
- manufacturing/commerce.

In the commercial society the benefits of the division of labour would be fully enjoyed. In such a society production comes about in a tripartite fashion, namely land, remunerated as rent, capital yielding profits and labour earning wages.

Smith (1776:III) invokes the history of Europe since the collapse of the Roman Empire to show that 'in the natural course of things' agriculture is developed first, and when it produces surplus subsistence, cities may be founded. Towns themselves furnish only the means of 'conveniency and luxury' (Smith *ibid*:482). Only when neither country nor town needs more capital, will investment in foreign commerce take place. The point is that in Europe's history this natural progression has been inverted. Feudalism devised rules

such as primogeniture and lineal succession and in this way deprived thousands from a living on the land. Great landlords were not interested in improving their estates. The power of feudal lords had to give way to that of kings and a growing number of city-based manufacturers, merchants and bankers, who invested in agriculture. As states were organised, the mercantile system arose with countless rules to promote exports and hinder imports (Smith *ibid*:IV). In each of these cases the actual developments were suboptimal, because they were contrary to the natural course of things, favouring manufacturers rather than society as a whole. Similarly, the physiocratic system is denounced because its focus on agriculture as the only source of wealth runs against securing the benefits of the division of labour (Smith *ibid*:860–861). Hence, Smith (*ibid*:V) sets out what Government policy should be to maintain the natural course of things.

Under 'perfect liberty', competition ensures that actual prices of all 'commodities continually gravitate to the central price' (Smith 1776:84). Monopolies of all kinds retard progress. Clearly, competition is the regulator in the system of exchange, and ensures optimal benefits under perfect liberty (Biziou 2003:205–207).

The relationship between the moral and the commercial society

The moral and the commercial society have a great deal in common, inasmuch as sympathy plays a role in the commercial society and exchange in the moral one. In the former sympathy enables us to know what others want, whilst in the latter people could simply get on 'by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation'. (Smith 1759:86). When confronted with crimes, whether against property or life, people want justice to be done. The individuals of a society are all equal in this regard. Smith (1759) states that:

> We are no more concerned for the destruction or loss of a single man, … than we are concerned for the loss of a single guinea, because this guinea is a part of a thousand guineas, and because we should be concerned for the loss of the whole sum. (p. 89)

Van Leeuwen (1984) sums this up as: everyone is everybody. Society consists of individuals who are as much distinct as coins of the same denomination (p. 97). Although the self-regulating systems of moral sentiments and that of economic exchange differ, they involve the same people, albeit seen from different perspectives. The two regulating systems may interact. Economic exchange relationships work best not only under competition but also when sympathy moderates the desire for what others have to a point of convenance where people are not tempted to steal or to borrow excessively. Nevertheless, in Smith's theory the two societies somehow remain distinct.

Modern neoliberalism, however, seeks to extend the rule of markets and competition to the whole of society (Dardot & Laval 2009:403–456), so that the commercial society completely overwhelms the moral one. This is a key element of current secularisation as it extends self-interest and competition to every area of life.

Smith's philosophy of history

Smith's four-stage history is a conjectural history, resting upon the following universal behavioural assumptions:

1. People are confronted with a scarcity of resources, especially during the first stage of hunting. (Smith 1776:2)
2. They want to better themselves, especially in a material sense. (Smith 1776:2)
3. They want to barter and exchange. (Smith 1776:22)
4. They share natural sentiments. (Smith 1759)
5. When successful in improving their material state, they would proliferate and create a new state of scarcity, necessitating a new stage. (Smith 1966:335)

Smith based these stages on a rather selective reading of studies of the Indian tribes of the Hurons and Iroquoys in America (Marouby 2004:39). He was determined that during the first stage people had to be hunters, since he presumed that they wanted to eat meat. He belittled evidence in his sources that women were engaged in growing maize, saying that they planted only a few of these plants behind their huts. As hunting ceased to provide sufficiency for a growing population, people would domesticate animals and become pastoralists. But how could they find time to tame animals when already under stress to find food for their people (Marouby 2004:162)? And how could exchange and a division of labour take place in the absence of a surplus?

Smith's discussion of the hunters is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they were unable to form capital as they had to spend all their time chasing animals. Yet, at the same time Smith argues that hunters could provide their necessities 'without great difficulty' (1766:335).

Turning to the question why historically there has been 'a slow progress of opulence', Smith (1766:521) mentions 'natural impediments', such as just alluded to and 'the oppression of civil government' as possible reasons. Marouby asks in this regard: 'But why should there be progress?' Neither Smith nor his modern followers question the need for progress or economic growth. One worries rather about its absence or slowness (Marouby 2004:161). Importantly, in the various descriptions of how the stages develop and necessitate, Smith implicitly confuses the quantitative and the qualitative. He postulates not only a numerical growth of the population beyond available resources but also an improvement of production in quantitative terms. Even qualitative improvements generate desires or inclinations for more (Smith 1766:335–338). Marouby concludes that this is highly significant 'not only for economic thought, but also for the history of ideas, because since Smith progress has always been conceived of in the manner of growth' (Marouby 2004:88). According to Marouby (2004) Smith, in fact, transposed his anthropology into his economic theory:

> In this transposition, the fundamental model of a universal progress of human societies, conceived as normative and natural, is translated into a temporal mode proper for economic life, which is also conceived as natural and normative, if not elevated to the supreme value, and from then on, the sovereign value of growth. (p. 30, author's own translation)

This desire for more is certainly a major element in present secularisation.

Smith's concept of philosophy

According to Vollenhoven (2000:1, 2) a thinker's concept must be identified in terms of the time period and his or her view of ontology or the vertical structure of the cosmos.

Smith was a typical representative of the Enlightenment of the 18th century, a period during which Christianity had lost its formative cultural power as the ideal of quantitative technical and economic progress through science took hold (Venter 1992:321–323).

Smith's ontology or view of the vertical structure of the cosmos, insofar as we can discern it from his epistemology, appears to be ennoetism or in-the-mind-ism. Tol (2010) notes that this type of philosophy is part of a theory of priority, meaning that there is one origin which diverges into a higher and a lower part. In ennoetism, according to Tol (2010), the nous or thinking or contemplating spirit is a higher principle, above that of psychic-somatic reality:

> which is entirely self-dynamic and self-guided. The chief role of mind, as higher principle, is to contemplate this reality which, in doing so, makes it the content of its knowing and affects it through knowing it … Considered from the perspective of the human being, perception focuses on the psycho-somatic reality, while cognition characterizes the mind's own contemplation. (p. 503)

Such a divergence is apparent in Smith's philosophy.

Origin

Smith (1759) called God the Author of nature who as an artist or craftsman constructed the universe like a machine (pp. 19, 105). According to Smith (1795) there is one origin of all, as he put it with reference to early humankind:

> The idea of an universal mind, of a God of all, who originally formed the whole, and who governs the whole by general laws, directed to the conservation and prosperity of the whole, without regard to that of any private individual, was a notion to which they were utterly strangers. (p. 113)

The allusion to a universal mind may well be an indication of a thinking mind as the higher part of the cosmos. The strong emphasis that Smith puts on the imagination, which includes reason, as the means whereby humans try to make sense of the universe is similar to the 'thinking contemplating nous' of the ennoetists.

We should note Adam Smith's admiration for Isaac Newton as the latter was also an ennoetist in Vollenhoven's scheme (2005:287, 288). The great influence which Newton had on 18th century thinking appears to have triggered ennoetism in at least 7 thinkers of the Enlightenment: Voltaire, Maupertuis, Buffon, d'Alembert, Lambert, Boscovich, Smith and Kant (Vollenhoven 2000:KG 44).

Primary divergence

If the thinking spirit is the higher part of the primary divergence of the origin, what is the lower part? Since movement cannot be imparted by a higher psyche, the psyche is built into the rest of the cosmos and therefore psychosomatic and self-moving.

In each of his key works Smith begins with passions and psychological sentiments. Self-movement is emphasised not only in the history of astronomy (Smith 1795:38, 54, 55, 58), but also in the natural course of things in human history (the four stages). Humans, too, have a higher mind and a lower psychosomatic part, which is affected by the mind (Smith 1759:27–31).

The emphasis on the sentiments of wonder, surprise and admiration in the development of science means that the acquisition of knowledge is not a seeking of truth but rather a way of calming these sentiments (Biziou 2003:41–45). Reality is there because it is felt by these sentiments; whereafter the imagination constructs its systems or machines.

Ennoetism has some additional features that can also be found in Smith, namely infinitism (Vollenhoven 2005:288) and aesthetics (Tol 2010:510). The division of labour will carry on as long as markets keep extending on the basis of an infinite process of capital accumulation. Aesthetics plays a role in the concept of being fit for utility (Smith 1759:IV). We admire technically sophisticated gadgets, even when they are not obviously useful, such as extremely accurate watches, and therefore take pleasure in making and having them, even when in the end they don't help us: 'It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind' (Smith 1759:183).

Smith's impartial spectator appears to represent the contemplating human mind. As a rational figure, even a semi-god and a judge (Smith 1759:245) he exercises a permanent regulating influence in the moral society. There is also a stoic notion here in the sense of a god-within. Van Leeuwen argues that the impartial spectator represents Smith's Christology. He is the abstract human, semi-mortal and semi-immortal, vested with divine authority, but also humankind's representative; human as spectator, and divine as impartial ideal spectator (Van Leeuwen 1984:89). Obviously, this is a totally secularised Christology.

Smith's view on technology is also interesting. He wrote about the steam engine: 'Such revolutionary processes are the work of contemplative minds' (Buchan 2006:41). When such contemplation result in new technologies, they will have unintended consequences, but however profound these might be, they would impair neither the mechanism of economic activity, nor that of moral action, nor that of the material world as set forth by Newton. They are all sets of efficient causes and as such related to the one ultimate cause, a provident God. What we perceive as unintended consequences (the invisible hand) are in fact intended effects of divine action (Biziou 2003:264–266). Smith uses the latter as a rhetorical device, but not as an explanatory principle.

The accumulation of capital and secularisation

Van Leeuwen has analysed Smith's view on the accumulation of capital in Smith (1776:I, II). A commercial society can only keep growing if after each round of production part of the profit made is invested in further capital assets. This is an infinite process or an iron law of nature (Van Leeuwen 1984:711). It involves 'a hidden priority of capital over labour'. Capital 'circulates automatically, like blood or water that returns as rain, as the stars by the universal force of gravity' (Van Leeuwen 1984:723, 730, author's own translation). According to this logic, all those who do not participate in expanding society's capital, are unproductive, including the military and government officials (Smith 1776:II/3). Smith calls on the parables of the talents (Mt 25:14–30) and the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32) to buttress his view. It costs time and money to develop talents, but once developed they may yield higher wages and may be passed on to one's children via better education. The talent of the labourer is transformed into the capital stock of society (Van Leeuwen 1984:758). With regard to the parable of the two sons, Smith (1776) lauds the older son who faithfully works, but condemns the younger for dissipating his substance:

> If the prodigality of some was not compensated by the frugality of others, the conduct of every prodigal, by feeding the idle with the bread of the industrious, tends not only to beggar himself, but to impoverish his country. (p. II, 3, 433)

Smith has secularised completely the great biblical message of the coming Kingdom. In his perspective we save ourselves *solo labore* [by work alone] and saving. By accumulating and investing capital we usher in everlasting prosperity. The tree of capital reaches to heaven (Van Leeuwen 1984:773–775).

Conclusion

As a deist, Adam Smith pursued his studies in the belief that the world is basically nature, left alone by God after the creation. Hence, in his main objective to become a Newton of human society, he looked for automatically working or self-regulating systems rather than for God-given norms which responsible human beings should seek to obey.

Society as a whole is a moral society in which passions and psychological sentiments are controlled by sympathy, a way in which we see ourselves as others may see us, a mirror image of loving others, including enemies, as ourselves. An ideal human or rational impartial spectator helps us do this in a reasonable manner.

The commercial society is a subset of the moral one, in which humans are driven by the psychical sentiment of exchanging, buying and selling to maximise their self-interest by competing with each other in markets. Technology allows for a division of labour. Technical innovations allow for an ongoing extension of such a division. By saving and investing, the wealth of nations increases. It is a recipe for becoming rich.

Both the moral and the commercial society are secularised concepts, distorted views of human beings and society. They have helped to make our society a materialistic one that puts its hope in technology, progress and quantitative economic growth. In this way Adam Smith may indeed be called a technicistic philosopher and as such a major contributor to the secularisation of Western culture.

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